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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000184

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: WEEKEND ARRESTS IN BANGLADESH RAISE QUESTIONS
ABOUT DOMESTIC TERROR GROUP AND POLICE COMPETENCE

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Weekend arrests of 14 suspected members of Bangladesh's leading domestic terrorist group grabbed headlines when one captive detonated a live grenade during a news conference announcing his capture. While the incident embarrassed the police, the arrests raised broader questions about the possible resurgence of the militant group, which conducted a nationwide string of near simultaneous bombings in 2005. Officials of Bangladesh's premier counterterrorism unit, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), insisted the Jamaatul-Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) Islamist terrorist group remained on the run. They also noted that tips from the public were crucial in capturing some of the suspects, underlying the importance of promoting community policing to foil extremist activity in this predominantly moderate Muslim nation of 150 million people.

DARING BOMBING DRAWS HUGE MEDIA ATTENTION

¶2. (C) RAB and Bangladesh police captured 14 JMB suspects on February 20-21 in a handful of separate operations. Although arrests of alleged JMB members are common, with more than 50 picked up in the last three months alone, the weekend operations were notable for netting several women and the reputed head of the group's military wing for the Dhaka region. What guaranteed sensational headlines, however, was one suspect's dramatic detonation of an improvised grenade at a police news conference announcing his arrest in Gazipur division, just north of Dhaka. According to news reports, the handcuffed suspect hurled himself onto the nearby display of seized grenades, pulled the pin from one and hurled it at nearby police and journalists. About a dozen people were injured along with the militant. Media and other law enforcement officials criticized the local Gazipur police for failing to secure the suspect's hands behind his back and for displaying grenades that had not been disarmed.

IS JMB RESURGENT?

¶3. (C) JMB is Bangladesh's most notorious domestic terrorist group. It originated in the late 1990s to overthrow the Bangladesh government and replace it with Islamic rule. On August 17, 2005, the group coordinated nearly simultaneous small explosions in more than 450 locations in Bangladesh; two months later the JMB attacked government buildings, judges, lawyers and secular non-governmental organizations. A subsequent crackdown led to the arrest of JMB senior leaders and about 700 operatives; in March 2007, six leaders were

executed. In the days following the latest arrests, news reports expressed alarm at the continued ability of the JMB to wreak havoc. The Daily Star, a widely read English-language newspaper, said in an editorial that the the news conference bombing "has definitely heightened concern about the extremists' undiminished capacity to unleash terror at the time and place of their own choosing."

14. (C) RAB Director of Intelligence Lt. Col. Mohammad Abdul Majid told PolOff he estimated JMB had 5,000 to 6,000 active members throughout Bangladesh in addition to many more sympathizers. He said the group also may have 15 to 20 suicide bombers. (Note: Col. Reza Nur Rahman Khan, the new RAB additional director general for operations, said he did not consider the attack at the news conference a suicide bombing. He said JMB members armed themselves with grenades primarily to use against their pursuers. End note.) RAB officials said the explosives seized along with the suspects were made of material found in local markets and did not indicate a major funding network. They said most JMB members were self-employed. Reza dismissed the JMB as a group "on the run" that had been made "very unstable" by recent arrests.

ARE WOMEN PLAYING A LARGER ROLE?

15. (C) Much media attention centered on the arrest of three women suspects in Gazipur. Newspaper accounts said the women behaved like trained JMB militants, destroying cellphone SIM cards upon arrest and remaining uncooperative during initial interviewing. The Bangla-language Prothom Alo, Bangladesh's

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largest newspaper, reported JMB had about 500 female members, and RAB officials said they had not yet ruled out the possibility of the captured women being JMB operatives. Still, they said RAB had no information confirming women JMB operatives. A more likely possibility was that the captured women and other female sympathizers were simply relatives of JMB members. Majid noted that JMB members were instructed to remain with their families so they would not need to make telephone calls or visits back home that could be detected by law enforcement. He said women who lived with male JMB operatives were more likely to identify with the terrorists' cause.

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CONCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR USG CT ASSISTANCE
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16. (C) The weekend arrests highlighted a number of ways the U.S. government could play a crucial role in helping Bangladesh fight its home-grown terrorists. The ability of shackled terror suspects to explode a grenade at a news conference underlined the importance for the U.S. government to broaden its anti-terrorism training for Bangladeshi law enforcement. Many newspapers said the JMB lacked public support, and tip-offs from the public directly led to the arrest of some of the suspects. U.S. government plans to promote community policing in areas of Bangladesh where terrorist groups are active would undoubtedly lead to even greater public support for counterterrorism activities. Finally, the arrests underlined the continued central role played in counterterrorism by RAB, which is denied USG training because of a history of extrajudicial killings. The new government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly stated its commitment to reducing extrajudicial killings, and the number of people killed in encounters with RAB has continued to fall. The USG should not miss the opportunity created by the Hasina government to help RAB improve its human rights performance and to embrace RAB as a key partner in fighting terrorism.

MORIARTY